

December 9 Scripture Reading:

Luke 1: 67, 76-80

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

December 9 – Preparing God’s Way of Peace

Pray with me. Gracious and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Isn’t it handy that today’s reading begins right where we left off last week?

Now wait a minute, you may say. Last week’s reading was from Luke 21 and today’s reading begins at the end of Luke 1. Today’s reading comes chronologically BEFORE last week’s reading!

Okay. Yes. You are absolutely correct. But hear me out. See today’s reading begins with a whole lot of HOPE -- the hope of an old man who had come to believe he would never be a father. The hope of a priest who has regained his voice after months without being able to speak -- see Zechariah was struck mute when he questioned the angel messenger who told him that his elderly wife Elizabeth would bear a son. The hope of a new father who has just named his infant son.

“And you, child,” Zechariah says of his son, “will be called the prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Yes, today’s reading starts out with a whole lot of hope. Zechariah’s hope for his son’s future and calling. And hope for God’s people with the promise of salvation, light and guidance into the way of peace. That’s right where we left off last week -- with a whole lot of hope. Hope in the face of the real struggles of our personal lives and the world around us.

Zechariah’s words of hope lead us to our theme for today -- God’s way of peace.

Did you notice how Luke, before telling us about John the Baptist and his ministry in the wilderness, gives us a good long list of who’s who in ancient Palestine? The emperor, the governor

of Judea, the ruler of Galilee and the rulers of neighboring regions, and, finally, the high priests of the day. Luke wants us to know without a doubt that this story takes place in a specific place and time. This is not the stuff of myth or fairy tale, Luke is telling us, but history located firmly in the world that he and his early audience knew so well.

And then Luke ends this list with a man who would be considered a “nobody” by all other historical accounts -- John. But John is no nobody by Luke’s account. For it is John, not the rich or powerful, not the most famous or sanctified, but wild man **John** to whom the word of God is revealed.

David Lose, a theologian and blogger whose work I follow, puts it this way: “God chose a nobody.... to prepare the way for God’s own Son to come amongst us. [But that is not all. Because this] happens to be a particular theme of Luke...: that God regularly chooses people whom the world sees as insignificant through whom to do marvelous things. John the Baptist, Mary the illiterate unwed [teenage mom], the no account shepherds at the very bottom of the economic

ladder who serve as the audience for the heavenly choir, [a helpless babe born in a manger]. Again and again, Luke confesses, God chooses people the world can easily ignore to participate in God’s world-changing, world-saving activity.”

God chooses people that the world considers to be nobody to prepare and follow in the way of peace.

People like us -- like you and me.

People like Olga and Jessie who work over at the Salvation Army.

People like Will and Staci and Nikki who work here.

People who show up to do the tedious work of refinishing wood floors or the heavy lifting of helping new friends move.

People who take cookies to new neighbors.

Children who invite us to laugh with them or who surprise us with their wisdom.

Even our neighbors who are homeless

Our loved one struggling with addiction or mental illness

The artist who lives down the street

Or that relative whose political opinion differs from our own.

Luke tells us that it is not the rich, famous or powerful that God works through, but the common person -- us.

God uses us to prepare the way of peace.

Now what does the way of peace look like?

The English definition of the word peace is freedom from disturbance; freedom or cessation of war; quiet or tranquility.

But the Greek word eirene (ay-ray-nay) translated as peace comes from the verb eiro (ay-ro), which means to join or bind together that which has been separated. Eirene is most often used to describe the experience of salvation that comes from God or harmonious relationships between people -- it is the wholeness that comes with reconciliation.

Following God's way of peace does not mean simply leading a life without disturbance or conflict, seeking a world without violence or war. Following God's way of peace means that we work for wholeness -- in ourselves, in our relationships, in our communities and in our world.

This is no easy task. It is much easier, I daresay, to avoid conflict than to seek wholeness. See, sometimes wholeness, sometimes reconciliation, sometimes peace requires conflict. In the same way that hope can only exist when it stands face to face with reality, peace can only be attained when we work to heal the wounds that we see in ourselves. In our relationships. And in our world. And sometimes this requires some struggle along the way.

President John F. Kennedy said this: "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding away old barriers, quietly building new structures." It does not happen overnight. It takes time and work and practice. Just like hope!

The Dalai Lama who serves as the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, reminds us that peace is not something that we can simply pursue on the outside. We must pursue it internally as well. Without peace within us, he writes, there is no hope of peace without.

Take a moment and close your eyes. Think of a place where you feel completely at peace. Take a

few deep breaths and imagine yourself in that place. Imagine what you see.... Smell.... Hear....
Feel the peace around you.
Feel the peace within you.

Now I want you to take a deep breath -- hold onto that sense of peace, if you can -- but now think about a relationship or situation in your life that is rife with conflict.

What does peace look like in that situation?
What can you do to bring more peace?

Okay. Now open your eyes.

By the mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Friends, just as God called John, a wild man in the wilderness, a nobody by most historical accounts, to receive God's word and prepare God's way of peace, so does God call us! God calls us to wholeness, God calls us to prepare God's way of peace: first in our hearts and then in our communities and the world.

Will you pray with me?

Holy and loving God, help us to remember that you have already been born within our hearts. Guide our feet into the way of peace. Help us to hear when you speak to us. And embolden us to prepare your way! In hope, in peace, in joy and in love. Amen.